

Abraham Lincoln papers

From Abraham Lincoln to Charles D. Robinson [Draft]¹, August 17, 1864

¹ Robinson was the editor of the Green Bay, Wisconsin *Advocate*, a Democratic newspaper that supported the Lincoln administration's conduct of the war. In a letter to Lincoln, which he sent through former Wisconsin governor and First Assistant Postmaster General Alexander W. Randall, Robinson reminded Lincoln of pledging, in his famous letter to Horace Greeley, that he would be guided in the question of slavery by whatever policy would best help preserve the Union. Robinson now pleaded for an explanation of Lincoln's insistence on the abandonment of slavery as a pre-condition for peace negotiations (see Robinson to Lincoln, Aug. 7, 1864). This is the first of two versions of the president's reply in this collection. It is in pencil and appears to be the earliest of the two. The later draft shifts the emphasis away from the ethical issue outlined here of keeping the promise of emancipation, focusing more on the issue of force. See Lincoln to Robinson, [Aug. 1864]. Lincoln read a draft of his reply to Randall, Judge Joseph T. Mills and William P. Dole on August 19, and their views may have caused Lincoln to revise the letter. A letter from Randall to Lincoln on Aug. 22, 1864 (*q. v.*) refers to a clause in the Robinson letter that might be deleted. Lincoln also is reported to have read a draft of this letter, presumably this one, on Aug. 19 to Frederick Douglass, who expressed concern about the president's willingness to negotiate with Confederate representatives. No indication that Robinson received a reply from the president is evident, and doubts about the political effect of the letter, along with the suggestion by Robinson that any response would be kept private, may finally have induced Lincoln to withhold the letter and reply to Robinson through private channels.

Executive Mansion,

Washington, August 17, 1864.

My dear Sir

Your letter of the 7th was handed me yesterday by Gov Randall— To me it seems plain that saying re-union and abandonment of slavery would be considered if offered is not saying that nothing else would be considered if offered— But I will not stand on the mere construction of language. It is true, as you remind me, that in the Greeley letter of 1862 I said "If I could save the Union without freeing any slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that" I also said in the same letter that "What I do about slavery and the colored race I do because I believe it helps to save the Union;

and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union. I shall do less whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do more whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause"² I said all this in the utmost sincerity, and I am as true to the whole of it now, as I was when I first said it— When I afterwards proclaimed emancipation, and employed colored soldiers, I only followed the declaration just quoted from the Greeley letter that "I shall do more whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause"— The way these measures were to help the cause could only be by inducing the colored people to practically come over from the rebel side to ours— On this point nearly a year ago, in a letter to Mr Conkling of Illinois, I wrote as follows. "But negroes, like other people, act upon motives. Why should they do anything for us, if we will do nothing for them? If they stake their lives for us, they must be prompted by the strongest motive, even the promise of freedom. And the promise being made must be kept."³

² See *Collected Works*, V, 388-89.

³ See Lincoln to James C. Conkling, August 26, 1863.

And this brings me us to the exact point of your letter. Do you think that whatever of promise to them colored people there is expressed or implied in the measures of emancipation and among those the colored people, should be broken, so soon as by breaking it, we can get a stipulation for peace and re-union? As a matter of morals could such an act, by any possibility, secure the approbation favor of Heaven, or of any good man? As a matter of policy, to announce such a purpose now, as it seems you would have me to do, would instantly ruin the Union cause itself— All recruiting of colored men would instantly cease; and all colored soldiers men now in our service would, (and rightfully too) throw down their arms— With these resources taken from us, the Union is not merely going, but is already gone— But, you ask, should the rebels say "we cease fighting, and consent to re-union, but we still claim to hold our slaves," do you intend, Mr President, to reject that offer of peace and continue this war? It would be no matter of choice with me. I could not continue the war in such case. The sources and means of war would fail me. But if the rebels would only cease fighting & consent to reunion on condition that I would stipulate to aid them in re-enslaving the blacks, I could not do that either— The people, if they would, could do that too; but I could never be their agent to do it— For such a work, they must find another would have to be found. What then? Simply this. We will cease the war, restore the Union, and our remaining dispute about slavery we will submit to the peaceful tribunals of courts and votes— Before these tribunals I should have little fear for those blacks who shall have ha actively accepted our promise, by coming out from among the enemy— For the rest, I fear their case might not be quite so clear.

But, my friend, let me remind you, that no one who can control the rebel armies has made the offer supposed. Let it be made, and peace will follow; but until made, let not the common enemy distract us with it as an abstract question. This abstract question is not new to my thoughts— In the Conkling letter, before mentioned, I said "Whenever you shall have conquered all resistance to the Union, if I shall urge you to continue fighting, it will be an apt time then for you to declare that you will not fight to free negroes."